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THE CHANGING STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

#115

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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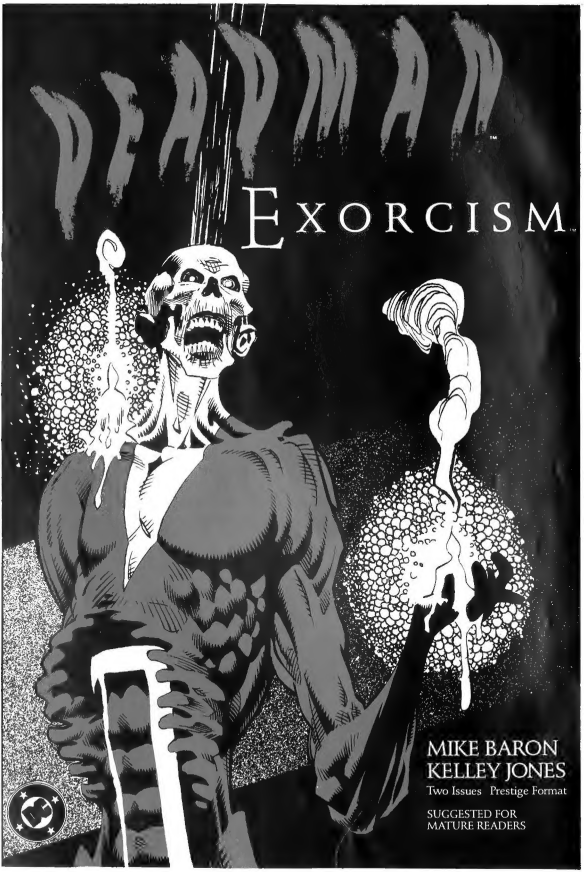

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UP FRONT

WRITING INTO THE SUNSET

The act of writing a story always seems to involve extremes for me.

When I was scripting (more particularly, plotting) comics for Marvel and DC, I was never the type who knew exactly how I'd handle a given character or series in advance. Not even my favorites!

No, my mind never spent a spare moment spinning any "what if" adventures — as in, "what if I wrote that series."

In fact, after the elation of landing a new assignment, my next state was usually one of absolute and total perplexion. It seemed I had not an idea in the world for a plot of any kind whatsoever.

That's one of the extremes, for me, about writing.

And then, after a bit of study and thought about a particular character trait or perhaps an abstract concept suited to the story in question, I'd begin to come up with a few bits and pieces that would point the way to a sketchy plot.

And, from there, one idea would suggest another, and another, and still another, until a creative flood ensued and I suddenly seemed to find myself with far more than I could fit into a single issue of a comic, and the story would spill over, often into at least three parts.

From one extreme to the other.

Once embarked upon a course, there's a sort of creative zen when the characters, concepts and situations become second nature and come alive somewhere in a writer's psyche. I still have file folders packed with plot ideas from my days of scripting THE DEFENDERS and MAN-WOLF for Marvel, and to this day I still come up with ideas for those characters.

Maybe, one of these days, I'll return to writing. Or maybe I'm just forgetting how much hard work it can be.

-DAVID

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"Topps was formed around the end of World War II by

Topps® LEN BROWN & GARY GERANI

Elvis Presley, Bazooka Joe, Exxon, Harvey Kurtzman, Mr. Pecker, Art Spiegelman, Roy Thomas, Dracula, and Jim Salicrup all have something in common.

What exactly they have in common I'll leave for Len Brown and Gary Gerani to explain. Len and Gary have over fifty years of combined experience at Topps and are the creative forces behind the trading cards that we see on sale everywhere. The trading card market is growing by leaps and bounds and Len and Gary have been there to witness the growth.

It was fascinating to sit down with these two men at the 1992 San Diego Comic Convention and learn the history of Topps.

CHARLES S. NOVINSKIE: *I guess we should start at the beginning with the history of Topps.*

LEN BROWN: Topps was formed around the end of World War II by four brothers, the **Shorin** family. **Arthur Shorin** is still the chairman today. It was a privately-held corporation for many years and then they went public in the early 1980s. I joined in 1959 and I remember the copy writer was writing copy about **"Fabian,"** who was a rock and roll idol at the time. He didn't know much about **Fabian** so he started asking me questions about **Fabian,** because I was a teenager at the time. That was my indoctrination into Topps. I was hired by **Woody Gelman,** who was the publisher

BRAM STOKER'S Dracula™

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four brothers, the Shorin family. Arthur is [illegible]man."

of Nostalgia Press. Woody was a wonderful man. When I was fourteen in 1955, Woody published a kids' magazine called TRIPLE NICKEL BOOKS. The book was capitalizing on the **Davy Crockett** rage. I wrote him a letter about it and he called me at home. We became close friends and when I turned 18 he asked me to work at Topps.

GARY GERANI: I hired on in 1972. I got my job through THE MONSTER TIMES. I had been writing articles for MONSTER TIMES and they let you take an ad out in their classified ads. At the time I was collecting science fiction movies and so was Len. We met and one thing led to another and before I knew it, I was at Topps writing the backs of trading cards. What Len was to Woody, I was to Len. I was also fortunate that Woody was still alive and working at Topps, because he was like the grandfather of all wonderful fantasy at Topps. Topps had that quality — that you were entering another world — a fantasy world. And even though Topps is expanding, it still has that quality.

LEN: Topps has a family quality to it.

GARY: So true, it's very true. Several years ago I moved to California, but I always look forward to going back to the home office in Brooklyn. I am now the west coast editor of cards and comics.

LEN: The original founders were actually in the gasoline business in Brooklyn and owned a chain of gas stations. They were very promotional minded and they were doing so well that Exxon bought them out. They wanted to go into another business, so they hired a firm that studied what might be appropriate. The firm felt that after World War II ended there would be a baby boom. They saw the connection between kids and bubble gum and Topps went into the bubble gum business. The company was always Brooklyn-based and back when I joined, the gum was being manufactured upstairs in the same building. I remember that you could walk around the block and still smell the sweetness of the gum.

GARY: And even though they stopped making the gum you could still smell it in the building. *(Laughter.)*

LEN: In the '60s they built a plant in Duryea, Pennsylvania, where Topps manufactures and packages the cards.

CHARLES: *What were some of the types of cards Topps produced?*

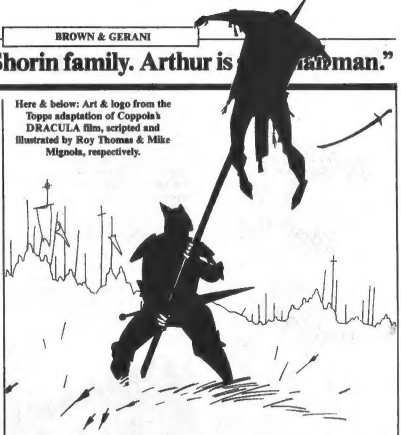
LEN: Topps did some non-sports cards in the late '40s. They did a thing called Flip-O-Vision. It was a strip of 30 photos that you cut apart and held together with a rubber band. You would "flip" the cards to animate them. I remember Dick Tracy and **George Burns** being on cards. They started doing baseball cards in 1951. The year 1952 was considered the premier of the Topps traditional baseball card, because it had the statistics and biographical information. The cards in 1951 were playing cards with players' photos on them.

Hopalong Cassidy was a big craze back then and it was **Woody Gelman** who had the foresight to do the cards. It was very successful for Topps and one of their very first licensed cards.

GARY: It should be mentioned that Woody, along with **Ben Solomon,** who just retired as head of our art department, worked for **Fleischer** Studios and worked on the POPEYE cartoons.

LEN: Woody and Ben also worked on

Here & below: Art & logo from the Topps adaptation of Coppola's DRACULA film, scripted and illustrated by Roy Thomas & Mike Mignola, respectively.



"Up until the '70s it was rare that a single movie was

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS in 1939. It's funny, because to hear them talk about it, they never thought the work was very good.

Topps had some very interesting licensing products; **Elvis Presley** came along in 1956, ZORRO was on television in '57 and they did a series on that.

CHARLES: *It seems like the '70s heralded some changes for card companies. Were there any changes at Topps?*

GARY: Up until the '70s it was rare that a single movie was a big hit for us. We tried with the PLANET OF THE APES movies. In the '70s STAR WARS changed everything. Since then, we've had a lot of successes with movies.

CHARLES: *I guess that the licensing aspect is a big part of the business.*

LEN: It's a tricky business and, of course, there's a lot of competition for the hot properties. Before we go on, I don't want to breeze past the '60s. Probably one of the biggest successes Topps ever had was **The Beatles** trading cards. The '60s also produced the MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. cards and the BATMAN cards from the television series.

GARY: And this is before my time at Topps, but we were unable to initially get **Burt Ward** and **Adam West,** so we did a series of painted cards.

LEN: I'll tell you what happened. At first

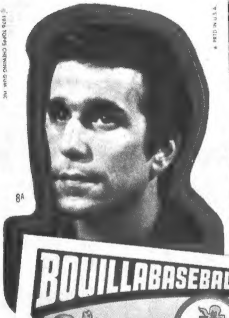
Topps has produced more sets of cards than we could possibly fit within the bounds of an entire issue of CI — but here's a sampling from the past and present — from THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. to BATMAN II.

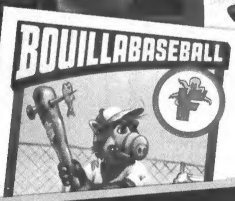
LUNCH BREAK!
MAN ON THE MOON
THE DARK KNIGHT OF GOTHAM CITY
MOONRAKER
INSIDE THE SPACE STATION
© Eon Productions Ltd. Eidrose Publications Ltd. 1979

a big hit for us. STAR WARS changed everything."

we couldn't get the rights to the actors' likenesses. One day I went into a store and there was a Viewmaster selling the BATMAN reel and the reel had the actors in it. The president of Topps contacted the BATMAN licensor and we were then able to get the rights.

GARY: A lot of the painter cards were done by **Norm Saunders,** who is like the grand master of painter cards. He was able to get so much detail into those





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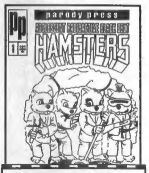

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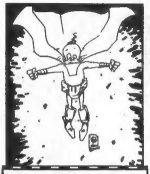

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"In my 30 years with Topps, this is the most exciting time."

cards! He painted those cards 5x7 and he would use a magnifying glass to paint the details. We did a set of Civil War cards that he painted and there was a scene of a fort blowing up and you could count the bricks in the fort. He did a lot of pulp covers and comic covers for **Ziff Davis** in the 1950s.

LEN: I remember we used to test-market products in **Mr. Pecker's** candy store, a store located around the corner from where 10-year-old **Gary Gerani** lived. *(Laughter.)*

GARY: Oh yes, **Mr. Pecker's.** I used to go and look through the comics.

LEN: And **Mr. Pecker** would say, "Hey kid, this ain't no library — don't mix up the books." *(Laughter.)*

GARY: I remember one day **Mr. Pecker** was gone and it was just **Mrs. Pecker,** who was a huge lady. We found out **Mr. Pecker** took off for Miami with some floozie. *(Laughter.)*

CHARLES: *You had a very successful series with your MARS ATTACKS cards. Tell us a little about that.*

GARY: From my point of view, well, as I mentioned earlier, I always loved science fiction, but there was never the degree of horror or bloodshed like we had with MARS ATTACKS. A few years later I had the pleasure of doing DINOSAURS ATTACK, which was my homage to MARS ATTACKS.

LEN: Woody and I talked about doing a painted series and we did a Civil War series. We didn't think it would sell, but the president of Topps said put out a Civil War series. We put in a lot of blood and guts on the cards. We even made up fictional battles and described them on the card backs. To my horror, I found out that teachers were using the cards in class, thinking the battles were real. We printed a newspaper logo on the backs of the cards with date lines, so I suppose it seemed pretty authentic.

GARY: Sort of the Civil War News. *(Laughter.)* In reality, though, it did help to get kids interested in history.

LEN: And that was where we got the idea to do another blood-and-guts series. Originally it was titled ATTACK FROM SPACE, but we called it MARS ATTACKS. We started with **Wally Wood,** who did the pencils. Wally was a god to me because I grew up collecting EC Comics. Amazingly, Wally's pencils looked a little static, so we called on **Bob Powell** to do the series. Bob did THE SHADOW comic book back in the '40s. He did very dramatic action.

GARY: The compositions were very precise. You could, I guess, compare

More cards from the distant past — Jack Davis provided the artwork for the "Funny Valentine" piece.

them to some of the best storyboards being done today. We also did a military painted series simply called BATTLE. We brought in a lot of EC artists working for us. **Jack Davis** worked for Topps. Topps has self-produced a lot of products and they always had to have the best artist on the series. **Art Spiegelman** of MAUS fame and Pulitzer Prize winner, worked for Topps. He came to work for us in 1964. We always knew Art would really be successful. Since I moved to California, I miss brainstorming with the guys in the office in Brooklyn. I think of the old days very fondly. It was lots of fun, because creative departments got away with murder because they had to be looser in order to be creative.

CHARLES: *What about Topps today? The market seems ripe for a company that can successfully combine the comic and trading-card markets.*

LEN: For me, in thirty some-odd years with Topps, this is the most exciting time I can remember. I've always wanted to do comics. In the late 1950s, Topps did a mock-up of a BAZOOKA JOE comic for Archie Comics, but it wasn't until recently that we got serious about doing comics. Every comic will come with trading cards and we think it's the perfect match.

"We take pride and interest in the creative process."

More of Mignola's stunning work from Brum Stoker's DRACULA.

GARY: It's interesting that we haven't changed. We're still what we were, we're a family that cares about what we do. I think that reflects in the products we produce. I think that it will carry over into the comics we produce.

CHARLES: *I don't think you could ask for better people than Jim Salicrup and Dwight Zimmerman heading the comics line. And Roy Thomas and Mike Mignola were the perfect choice for adapting DRACULA.*

LEN: Roy is fabulous. Did you know we were roommates in the '60s? Roy wanted to do a BAZOOKA JOE comic and turn him into Captain Bazooka. *(Laughter.)* It might have worked. Who knows, we might yet do it one day. It might sound self-serving, but we take pride and a personal interest in the creative process. These are the toys we like to play with — it's fun for us.

CHARLES: *I have one question I'm just dying to ask — why did Topps stop putting gum in the sports cards?* (Laughter.)

LEN: We stopped putting gum in the sports cards because people were complaining that the gum was staining the cards.

GARY: And a lot of people were confusing the cards for the gum.

CHARLES: *I assume the sports cards are still the big seller for Topps?*

LEN: Sure. With all of the competition from new companies the card market has really expanded. In fact, we've expanded our line of baseball cards. We've had great success with STADIUM CLUB BASEBALL, which is a super premium card.

And, next year we'll be doing JURASSIC PARK as a comic as well as trading cards.

GARY: And, in addition to that, we'll be doing a JURASSIC PARK souvenir book. Even for those magazines, we try to match the talent to the project. Working at Topps is so much fun because everyone there cares so deeply about their work!

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Unused cover illustration that was done for X-FACTOR #16. (Walt Simonson provided the cover that was used.)

"I found it increasingly harder to turn pages in on time."

DAVID MAZZUCCHELLI

Photo: Bill Kieffer

Here in part one of this two-part interview, David Mazzucchelli discusses the demanding nature of working on monthly titles such as BATMAN: YEAR ONE and DAREDEVIL. Born in Rhode Island, Mazzucchelli graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design and eventually spent nine months in Europe, where he experienced European lifestyles first-hand. The influence his stay in Europe had on his work is plainly apparent . . .

PAUL POWER: *The first thing I want to talk to you about is your career. You were this really hot artist working on DAREDEVIL and BATMAN: YEAR ONE with Frank Miller and everyone was talking about you. And then, all of a sudden, it seemed like you disappeared. What happened?*

DAVID MAZZUCCHELLI: Basically — I disappeared. *(Laughter.)*

PAUL: *You got bored?*

DAVID: No, I didn't get bored, I just got burned out on what I was doing and I became very dissatisfied with the type of work that I was doing — to the point that I had to stop working on comics. I had to think about if I really wanted to continue working on comics and, if I didn't, what did I want to do?

PAUL: *What was it that burned you out?*

DAVID: It was a combination of things. The monthly schedule was part of it. In order for me to try and produce quality work, I found it increasingly harder and harder every month to turn the pages in on time. On purely an artistic level I was dissatisfied. And from the day I started drawing superhero comics, I always had a small doubt about the validity of the superhero comic as a genre. I would say that over the years those doubts became larger and larger and I got to the point that I decided it wasn't the type of work I wanted to do anymore. What was interesting was that I realized that I still liked comics — but that I had to get away from doing superhero comics. It took me two years of not doing comics to decide what I wanted to do. Fortunately, because the last few projects I worked on in comics were very successful, I was afforded the luxury to take the time to think about those things and to do other things in the meantime. I received pretty good royalties and so I did some teaching.

PAUL: *What was it like working with Frank Miller?*

Batman & Catwoman ® 1992 DC Comics, Inc. / Daredevil, X-Factor, X-Men & Kingpin ®1992 Marvel Entertainment Group.

"When I entered comics I responded to the way

Original pencils & finishes from page 5, panel 1 of BATMAN #436.

DAVID: At the time I was living in New York, and Frank was living in California. Everything was done over the phone. Frank took over the book when **Denny O'Neil** was booted off and apparently Frank was interested in working with me. One of the reasons I wanted to pursue comics was because of Frank's work on DAREDEVIL when I was in college. My roommate was buying the comics and I thought that **Miller** was really shedding some new light on the comics industry. Frank and I were very excited about working with each other and he had a very clear idea about the storylines. We each had ideas and most of them coincided so we fed off of each other. We'd talk about plots over the phone. We decided we wanted the credits to read by **Frank Miller** and **David Mazzucchelli**, knowing full well that people would say, "Is Frank doing some of the art?" Since we were collaborating we didn't want to break up the credits. We were discussing plots and then Frank was writing a full script. Again, once I would get the scripts we'd talk back and forth on the phone. It was a very flexible working relationship.

PAUL: *A lot of respect.*

DAVID: Yeah, I think there was. I think the finished product was very nice.

PAUL: *I had heard rumors that you were working in advertising in New York.*

DAVID: Not true, I never did a single piece of advertising. I taught at a private junior high school I was teaching art and I also taught a comics class, which I found was very difficult. I found out how difficult it is to produce comics and it is especially difficult to teach it to kids. Some kids understood, almost intuitively, how comics worked. I found that if the kids didn't have an interest in comics to begin with it was difficult to teach them. In very general terms I tried to talk about storytelling technique. It was much easier for me to teach a general art class where I could teach philosophy.

PAUL: *You just signed a few comics and you mentioned an INDIANA JONES comic you did with Vince Colletta. How did you like working with Vince?*

DAVID: Well, it was my second job I ever did professionally. I found out Vince was inking it and I wasn't pleased. When I saw the finished results I wasn't too happy. In hindsight it was all right; when I look at the pencils and the inks it wasn't changed a whole lot. There were still things I liked better about the pencils. He simplified some things that later on I

Gene Colan captured the feeling of naturalism."

--WE HAVE ENTERED THE LOBBY--NO SIGN OF HIM YET--
UNIT ONE, REPORTING--SECOND FLOOR'S A MESS--NOTHING LIVING--
UNIT TWO, REPORTING--FOUND A BODY UNDER THE WATER HEATER--JUST AN OLD WINO--
KEEP IT TIGHT--KEEP IT TIGHT--
OVER HERE--GIVE ME SOME LIGHT--

learned to simplify myself.

PAUL: *Who were some of the people that you liked in comics?*

DAVID: When I entered comics I really wanted to approach my work the way **Gene Colan** did. Coming from an art school background and drawing from life I really responded to the way he was able to capture the feeling of naturalism. I liked the subtlety of his work. I still had a lot of love for the **Kirby** stuff — which was big and bold and clean. I think people overlook the subtlety of **Kirby's** work. Let's face it, it's not all leaping over buildings and punching through walls. I find that after drawing comics for a number of years I always go back to drawing things that I liked as a kid. When I was a kid I remember **Roy Crane's** BUZZ SAWYER from the local newspaper. As a kid I immediately responded to it. The key is to get it all there, but to do it as simple as possible. Comics is basically a short-hand vision of what we call the real world. It works best when the drawn line is creating a reality that is very pure and simple.

PAUL: *You mentioned that you spent some time in Europe.*

DAVID: Basically, I went because my wife was going. She received a grant when she graduated college and she decided she wanted to live in Italy. I was working in comics at the time — drawing DAREDEVIL, in fact — and I told them I was thinking of leaving for Italy in a few months and I thought they would say "Great for you," and then say goodbye forever. Instead, someone in the office said, "We've got guys in the Philippines working for us; why can't we have a guy in Italy working for us?" So I took a couple of months break to get situated and then continued working on the book. We lived in Italy for six months and then travelled Europe the remainder of the three. Living in Europe really influenced my work and I think it really showed. If you look at the books before I left for Europe and then the ones I did there, you can see the differences. I was starting to think about the graphic design and the impact of the storytelling. When I got back from Europe **Frank Miller** took over writing the book and you could see the differences in the stories. It was great working with Frank because he was working in a lot of Christian imagery into the story and I saw a lot of the iconography in Europe.

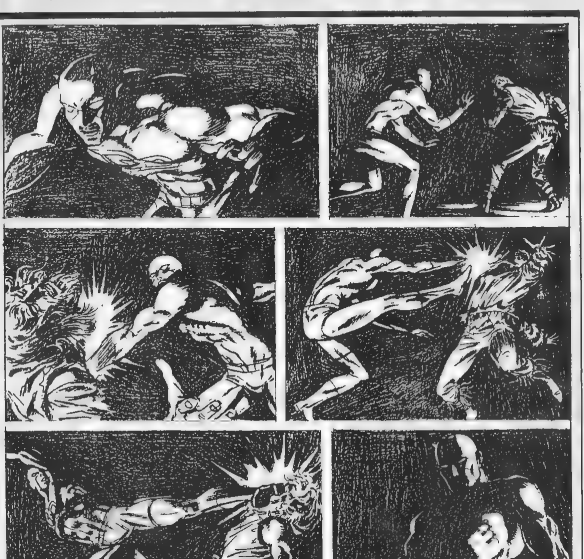
"I want to get into writing my own stuff and visualizing it."

PAUL: *What about film work? Have you thought about doing storyboards?*
DAVID: I did storyboards once for a writer/director who contacted me after seeing BATMAN: YEAR ONE and asked if I'd be interested. Not ever doing storyboards before, I said, "Sure, why not?" I found it interesting but, at the same time, it made me realize I enjoyed comics. I really want to get into writing my own stuff and visualizing it in my own way.

Next page: six-panel pencil sequence from DAREDEVIL #206, page 19, minus panel 1. Here: The pencils and finished inks for page 19 of BATMAN #404 (Year One, part one).

PAUL: *When you visualize your own stuff, do you think of yourself as being like a film maker?*
DAVID: I do in a way. I realize right away that there are big differences between film and comics. The most obvious as far as I'm concerned is motion. In film, because the camera moves, you can do a lot of things with motion that you can't do in comics. In comics you have to apply the motion in different ways. Comics, to me, to try to duplicate film panel-by-panel, can get a little tedious because it slows down the action. In comics you have to compress

"I created a work and it stands or falls on its own merits."



time and exaggerate things.

PAUL: *But comics and film are related and they can borrow from each other.*

DAVID: Oh, most definitely! I usually have a lot of ideas in my head for panel composition, but then I realize that I can't get it down on paper, because I'm looking at it from a point of view, say, from behind someone's head, something you could pull off if the camera were moving.

PAUL: *Now that you're self-publishing your work, where do you get your ideas from?*

DAVID: Basically, I look at the type of stories that I really want to see in comics. I looked at the comics I was working on, like DAREDEVIL, and then looked at the books I actually read and the movies I went to see, and they were different. I wanted to make some comics more like the things I enjoy watching and reading.

PAUL: *The other thing I like is that you're putting your money where your mouth is when you self-publish. A scary thing.*

DAVID: A very scary thing! It's a great idea when you think of it . . .

PAUL: *And you've only got yourself to blame when . . .*

DAVID: Exactly, and that's part of the pleasure of it. If it works, you can take the responsibility. If it doesn't work there's no one to blame, no one to point your finger at. It's much more like I did in my college days, where I created my own piece of work and it stands or falls on its own merit. It will be interesting to see the numbers when the orders are back in on the first issue of RUBBER BLANKET!

NEXT ISSUE: After dropping out of sight from mainstream comics in 1989, David reappeared in 1991 with the above-mentioned RUBBER BLANKET. In part two, he talks about life without Spandex gods —!

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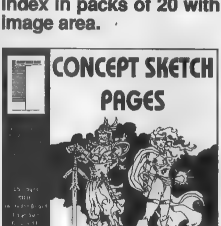

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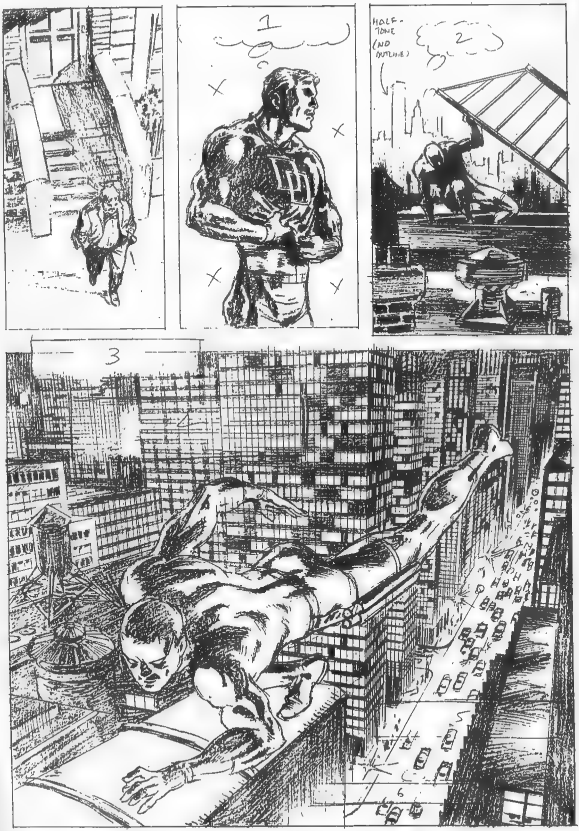
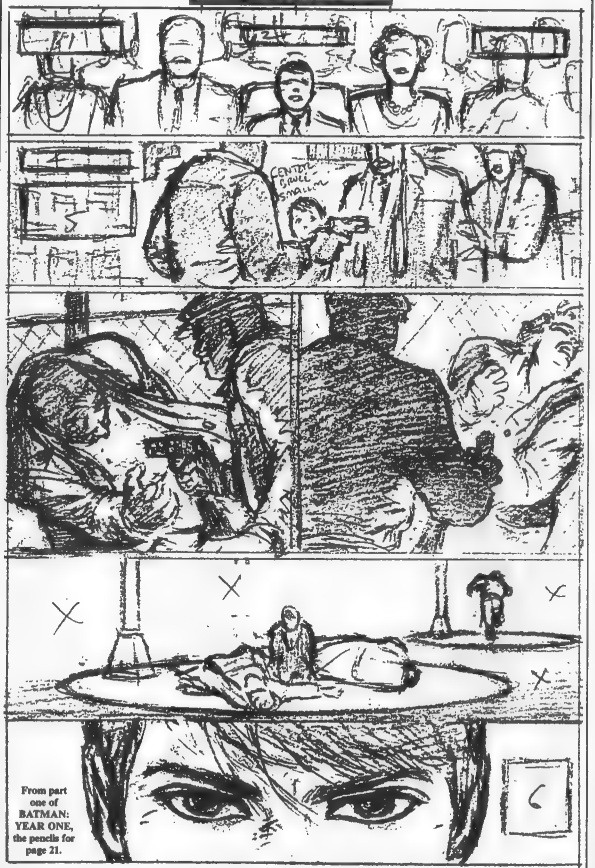
Another behind-the-scenes page: the non-ballooned/captioned splash from DAREDEVIL #225, featuring the Vulture.

MAZZUCCHELLI

The original pencils for page 8 of David's only X-FACTOR (#16).

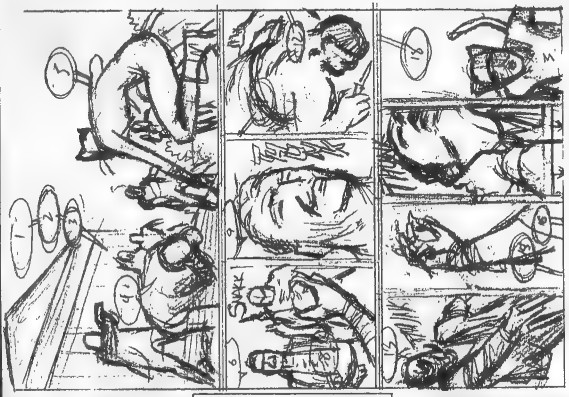


More DAREDEVIL — pencils from #212. The fourth panel is reminiscent of Gene Colan's DD.



From part one of BATMAN: YEAR ONE, the pencils for page 21.

An item from "Near Miss" in RUBBER BLANKET #1 (page 4, panel 1).



BATMAN #497, page 14, with Catwoman.

"Len Brown contacted me while I was at Marvel and

JIM SALICRUP

For the past twenty years, Jim Salicrup's name has been synonymous with Marvel Comics. All of that is about to change. Jim is known throughout the comics industry for his excellence as an editor. (He's not that bad a writer either!)

Apparently Topps agrees, as Jim is now the editor-in-chief of their newly formed division — Topps Comics. Combining the perfect mix of the comic and trading card industries, Topps has launched their first comic series adapting Bram Stoker's novel from the movie being produced by Francis Ford Coppola.

The future looks bright for this newly-formed company and Topps couldn't have made a better choice by picking Jim Salicrup as their "topp" man. As Jim is fond of saying with a chuckle, "Make mine Topps."

Jim took time during this year's San Diego Comic Convention to fill me in on the plans Topps Comics has for 1992 and beyond.

CHARLES S. NOVINSKIE: *You're kicking off the line of Topps Comics with the adaptation of DRACULA.*

JIM SALICRUP: I can't take a whole lot of credit for it since it was all pretty much in place before I got there. **Roy Thomas** and **Mike Mignola** were already at work on the project before I started.

CHARLES: *Who contacted you concerning the position at Topps?*

JIM: Len Brown contacted me while I was at Marvel and asked me if I'd be interested in being editor-in-chief over at Topps. I worked at Marvel for 20 years and for the first 17 years I didn't receive any other offers. About the time the new SPIDER-MAN title that I edited came out, and thanks to **Todd McFarlane**, I was starting to get more offers.

A lot of the offers I had to turn down because I would have had to move to the west coast and I can't stand being away from my family and friends here on the east coast.

Some of the other offers included starting up a company with investors backing me, that sort of thing. That is more work than I'm cut out for. Plus, it

Illustrations here & throughout by Mike Mignola, from the upcoming Topps Comics adaptation of Francis Ford Coppola's DRACULA.

Bram Stoker's DRACULA, ©1992 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

asked if I'd be interested in being editor-in-chief at Topps."

means the pressure of paying the rent and meeting payroll and that kind of stuff. Maybe **Ron Perlman** and **David Kraft** can run financial empires, but I can't.

I considered Len's offer because Topps has been around for 40 years and they seemed very serious about launching a line of comics. In that sense they needed me because figuring out how to survive in today's market isn't easy. Like I mentioned, they already had the rights to the DRACULA movie. They had seen GOTHAM BY GASLIGHT and they felt that **Mike Mignola**, the artist on GOTHAM BY GASLIGHT, was the perfect choice to pencil the book. **Ira Friedman**, our publisher, went out of his way to track down **Mike Mignola**. We were incredibly lucky that one of Mike's dream projects was to draw an adaptation true to **Bram Stoker's** original DRACULA novel. Mike is much in demand and his schedule is full for the next several years. Mike said if the offer had been anything else *but* DRACULA, he would have turned it down. Mike asked to see the screenplay and he loved it. The screenplay is by **James V. Hart**, who is co-producer of the movie. In order to do the movie they had to make a few changes from the novel to adapt it to film, but the changes were minor. **Roy Thomas** was already hired as the writer of the book, mainly because of his reputation for adapting CONAN and STAR WARS so successfully to comics. Roy was a natural choice. I guess it didn't hurt that **Roy Thomas** and **Len Brown** are old friends and were roommates back in the '60s. *(Laughter.)*

In fact, I think that Roy was one of the people that was contacted concerning the editor-in-chief job at Topps because of his experience as editor-in-chief at Marvel.

In a sense we've gone full circle because, when I was hired at Marvel, I sent in a postcard to **Roy Thomas** and I got the job that way. Now, 20 years later, Roy recommended me to Topps for this position.

Usually the best time to get a job is when you already have one. And even

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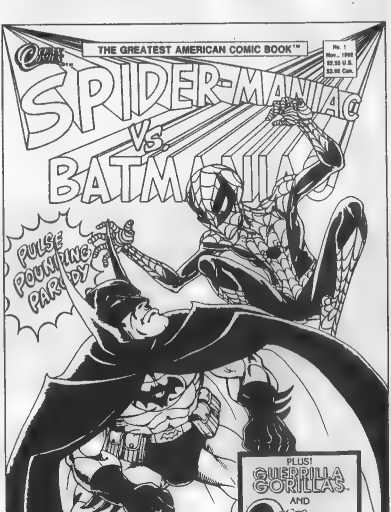

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"We're lucky starting out with the DRACULA book."

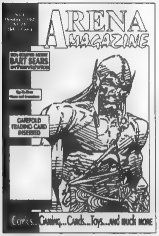
last December, Charles, when you stopped up to see me at Marvel I was juggling three different offers. Plus, I was in a new position at Marvel that I was happy with. I was working as custom comics editor with **Barry Kaplan,** who was a sensational guy to work with. His uncle, **Elliot Kaplan,** worked as editor on the original CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED. Before I left Marvel, I was involved with the Charleston Chew Candybar/Wolverine comic. The deal was to send in the wrappers for the comic. I enjoyed producing the custom comics and I was involved with a lot of them from Kool-Aid to Nestle's Quik. It was a great way to get exposure for Marvel, but the opportunity to start a new line of comics is even more exciting to me. There's no way Marvel could have offered a similar situation. They have Epic Comics, but that line is secondary to the main line. And, of course, if you start a new line of comics at Marvel and it succeeds, "Marvel did it."

This is a real test for me. Marvel owns half of the comics market — if you do something for Marvel, well, it better succeed. *(Laughter.)*

To start a comic line you are starting with zero market share — we really have to apply ourselves. We're lucky starting out with the DRACULA book because the project is first class every step of the way. The movie itself has an excellent screenplay by **Hart** that is very faithful to the novel.

CHARLES: *There have been literally hundreds of DRACULA movies and not one very close to the novel.*

JIM: Exactly, this is a very close adaptation of the novel. The movie aside, I think the comic adaptation can and will stand on its own. If someone is into Dracula or **Mike Mignola's** artwork, you don't need to see the movie. I must comment that the cooperation we have received from the movie people has been extraordinary. From **Francis Ford Coppola** coming to the San Diego Con to Mike working with Francis. Mike did some storyboards for the movie. Roy had dealings with the screenwriter as well. There's one thing all of these people have in common, and that is that they have deep respect for comics creators. There was no hint of snobbishness or condescension on the part of the movie people. Francis brought **Jim Steranko** in early on to do production paintings for



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"Everyone from Wood to Spiegelman worked at Topps."

the movie. I don't think any of it was ever used, but it shows that Francis has respect for these artists. Mike was overjoyed to tell me the night after he saw a rough cut of the movie that what he figured to be a screening filled with movie people, was only three people, Francis, Mike and **George Lucas.** After the screening they ate and discussed the movie.

The last panel of the first issue was based on a suggestion by **Hart** after he saw how Roy divided the screenplay into four parts. The book is just a wonderful collaboration between everyone involved. The cooperation has been unbelievable.

CHARLES: *Who decided that Topps should get into the comics business?*

JIM: One of my first questions to Topps was, "Why have you guys waited so long?" **Len Brown** is a big comics fan and he's been there since he was 18 years old. His mentor there was **Woody Gelman** who was the owner and founder of Nostalgia Press. So there's a long history of working with comics people, doing cards and other items. Everyone from **Wally Wood** to **Art Spiegelman** has worked at Topps. Basically, Topps didn't feel there was much money in comics. The thing that changed that thinking was the development of the entire direct sales market. It cuts down their risk considerably. The newsstand market is a returnable market; in theory, you could publish a comic and get every copy back from the newsstand. That can't happen with today's direct sales market.

CHARLES: *So Topps will be a direct sales publisher?*

JIM: Not totally, but a big part will be direct sales. Topps will be adapting JURASSIC PARK and that will be one of our first newsstand titles. DRACULA doesn't make sense for newsstand sales because it is an "R" rated movie. We will be putting a "suggested for mature readers" label on the cover. Ironically, the creators on the books are censoring material, not me. Normally you hear complaints about the publisher or editor censoring the book and requesting changes. We were committed to — whatever's in the movie we'll do in the comic book. Roy and Mike had problems with some of the stuff being appropriate for the comic. They're keeping a lot in, but Mike is being very tasteful and subtle with some scenes. Out of necessity, with only four issues, we obviously can't include every scene from the movie.

CHARLES: *Was Topps committed to DRACULA before the formation of a comic company, or were the two related?*

JIM: Topps has been talking about comics for years. Topps in general, with the non-sports cards, has been licensing properties for years, including the first Marvel cards. In the course of properties being offered DRACULA came along. I don't think DRACULA made sense as a mass market card item because it is an "R" rated movie. Kids will probably love

"I've always been a fan of lean, small operations, no fat.

it anyway because of the great special effects. Ira and Len felt it would be a good first project for their comics because they're making a statement by involving some of the top names in the industry.

The fact that it isn't a sports or "G" rated comic will let people know that we're not going to be Disney or Harvey Comics. The content and quality of this project will set the tone for future projects.

CHARLES: *Being Topps, will we see trading cards with the book?*

JIM: Every comic Topps will be publishing will be polybagged with trading cards. The name Topps is such a strong trademark that everyone thinks of cards. It would be silly not to include cards. There will be, exclusive to the direct market, a 100-card set of DRACULA cards. There will be a subset of 12 cards that will include artwork from the comic. The comic will be $2.95, 32 pages, high quality paper. The book will be out in October and the movie will be out a week before Thanksgiving. The first two issues of the comic will be out before the movie. The teasers are now running in theaters. We're hoping that the two products will feed off each other — those interested in the comic will go see the movie and those that see the movie will want the comic.

CHARLES: *Will you have an in-house staff of creators, or will the comics be written and drawn by freelancers?*

JIM: We're using freelancers. Topps operates very lean. Right now there are

officially two people in-house involved with Topps Comics. **Dwight Jon Zimmerman** is assistant editor and I'm editor-in-chief. Basically the two of us are doing what five departments at Marvel would be doing: promotion, direct sales, foreign and domestic licensing, manufacturing and editorial. We're doing it all ourselves with help from Ira, our publisher, **Len Brown,** and **Don Alan Zakrzewski, Mark Weintraub,** and **Arthur Shorin,** chairman of the board and our hardest worker.

We'll be bringing in more people at a later date, but now it's good that we're doing it all at this early stage. It's easy to lose touch with everything and you tend to lose sight of the things required to make something a success. I've always been a fan of lean, small operations, no fat basically. COMICS INTERVIEW, I think, is a good example of a lean operation, and I like that.

CHARLES: *Will Topps be doing just licensed properties or will there be a mix?*

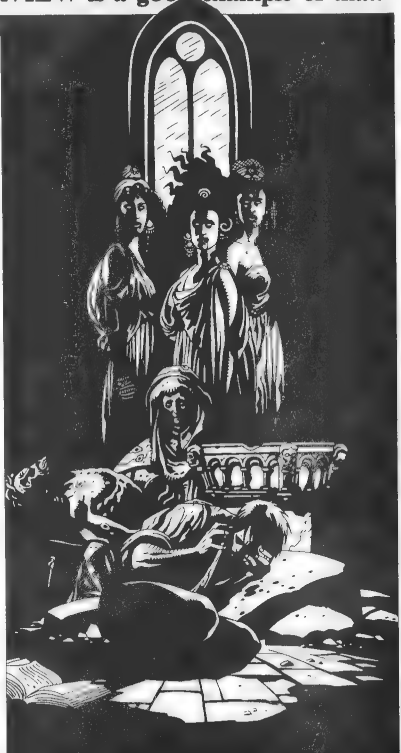
JIM: If you look at Topps cards there's always been a mix. MARS ATTACKS, for example, was created by Topps. MARS ATTACKS, by the way, will be one of our comics. There are also a lot of

COMICS INTERVIEW is a good example of that."

licensed products. We're going to do a lot of everything, some superhero books and some creator-owned books. Whatever is successful in the direct sales market is what we will be doing. On the other hand, we'll be doing some new things in direct sales that we hope to make successful by aggressively promoting the product. I don't feel that I have the most sophisticated taste in the world so that when I like something, usually millions of other people will like it also. When I like something and millions of people didn't like it, that means something got screwed up by the people promoting it. It's silly now, but I think of STAR TREK, which was cancelled the first time. People were saying it was too intellectual or whatever; now that idea is ludicrous. Even at Marvel, before STAR WARS came out, the conventional wisdom was "science fiction doesn't sell." I'm a big disbeliever in conventional wisdom. Right now the movie UNFORGIVEN is doing phenomenal. This is at a time when the conventional wisdom is that westerns don't sell. That's wrong — bad westerns don't sell; poorly-promoted westerns don't sell. I've been in theaters where they were showing the trailer and the response was overwhelming and we don't see **Clint Eastwood** until well into the trailer. Good comics will sell, if promoted properly. Business people just like to play it safe.

It's the same way in comics, where everyone tries to produce a safe bet. We're going to take a few chances. But keep in mind that Topps isn't a charitable organization. Topps is a publicly-owned company and we take our commitment to our stockholders very seriously. If we can't make money in the comic market then we won't be in it.

I think that we've done a great job promoting DRACULA and a lot of the credit goes to our publisher, **Ira Friedman**. We tackled a few misconceptions. One, people felt that movie adaptation comics were junk. Another was that Mike isn't a "hot artist." **Mike Mignola** is someone I've always had the utmost respect for. When I look at his artwork, I get the same feeling I get as I did back in 1968 when I was looking at **Jim Steranko's** material. I don't think Mike has gotten the recognition he deserves, but I think he is about to. His GOTHAM BY GASLIGHT, IRON WOLF, FAFHRD AND THE GREY MOUSER — he is one of the best artists out there and we're lucky to have him working for us. Mike is an artist's artist. He is an incredible talent. So when Mike does a movie



"Topps will have g[illegible]ied line of books. Science fiction

to licensed titles to creator owned to company owned."

adaptation comic, our job is to make everyone aware that a great artist is doing a great comic that just happens to be a movie adaptation.

CHARLES: *Tell us about JURASSIC PARK.*

JIM: JURASSIC PARK will be out in the summer of 1993 and will be followed by various spin-offs. Both the novel and the movie end with opportunities for sequels. I guess you could say we'll be handling JURASSIC PARK much in the same way Dark Horse handled ALIENS. For anyone that has read the book, imagine what the movie will be like with Steven Spielberg directing it. Since JURASSIC PARK will be our first newsstand release we'll probably also do an exclusive direct-sales version, done on better paper and such. We haven't ahnounced who will be doing the book yet, but for the people that follow comics, they'll know that there are a few creators that have a big love for dinosaurs.

CHARLES: *So you're saying Walt Simonson will be doing JURASSIC PARK?*

JIM: I'm not saying anything, you said that. *(Laughter.)* One thing that I was happy about being at the trade show in San Diego is that it's August and DRACULA isn't supposed to be out until October and yet we have covers of the issue to show the distributors.

When we announce the creators of JURASSIC PARK we want to have some artwork to show. When you announce a creative team, people ask to see artwork. We may publish the book weekly so that you'll have the entire book when the movie hits, and then follow with the spin-offs.

We're going to have a new title launch every month starting with January of '93. We're announcing JURASSIC PARK this far in advance because we feel it's going to be a mega-hit.

We don't want to announce things too far in advance because there's a lot of gossip in this industry and we don't want the news to get old fast. We want to maintain excitement about a project at the time when it is being solicited.

When you solicit to the market you have to reveal nearly everything. Timing is everything.

It was rewarding for us to get the support of the distributors with our very first comic. Diamond gave us their "Gem of the Month Award" for the comic and the cards. Capital gave us the "Pick Hit to Click." That doesn't just happen, it reflects the confidence and faith the distributors have in us and we're working hard to earn that respect. It is also a reflection of the strength of the movie and the creators involved.

CHARLES: *When I heard Topps was going into comics, the first thing that came to my mind was a sports comic.*

JIM: Probably that came into everyone's mind. Probably a baseball comic by Topps would be a great seller to the people that buy the baseball cards. We will eventually have a sports comic, but right now we wanted to be taken seriously as a comic publisher, as if we were independent of Topps.

CHARLES: *Right now we're looking at comics revolving around movie adaptations. What other specific directions will Topps take with their comics.*

JIM: I think you'll see by the end of 1993 that Topps will have a varied line of books from science fiction — to licensed titles — to creator owned — to company owned. I think that everyone that is desperate to categorize us will be able to do so and put us in a variety of categories. I hope by 1994 we'll be able to surprise everyone again.

"Star*Reach is growing rapidly and we expect

*I cheated. I conducted this three-part interview with Star*Reach agents Mike Friedrich and Sharon Cho as if I hardly knew them. The truth is I've been working with Mike since 1983, when he decided to represent my first comics property, an original series I pitched to DC.*

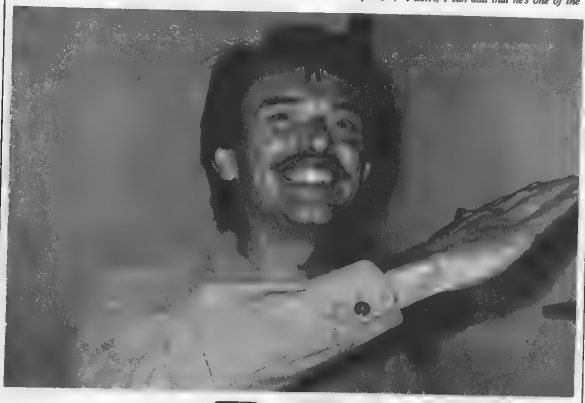
*Dick Giordano liked that proposal and recommended Mike to me as a possible next step. I called Star*Reach and, as Bogart says in CASABLANCA, it was "the beginning of a beautiful relationship."*

*DC never bought that proposal, but Star*Reach went on to help me sell other stories over the years. More than that, Mike was instrumental in guiding and counseling me when I knew next to nothing about the inner workings of the industry. For instance, when a fellow by the name of David Anthony Kraft offered me a job as managing editor of COMICS INTERVIEW, back in 1985, Mike's strong advice was, "Take it." He said that time put in as a comics pro, even if it was in a job slightly removed from my aspirations as a writer, would be time well spent. For one reason, he said it would help show industry insiders that I could be counted on for professional results. He also cited a number of other reasons, all of which later proved to be true.*

I immediately moved from California, where I'd just arrived, to Clayton, Georgia, where COMICS INTERVIEW is produced, and took up the reins. In order to preserve my love relationship, I later moved back to California, continuing to edit the magazine from afar.

My first day in Berkeley, Mike's advice paid off in an unexpected way when he offered me a job as a consultant — due to my newly-won professional status, he was convinced I could help him out with the agency! That was 1986, and since then I've had a unique opportunity to help evolve the only true talent agency in our field. It's been an incredible learning process and creative forge.

If I had to sum Mike Friedrich up in one word, I'd say "progressive." But since I don't, I can add that he's one of the



Star*Reach PRODUCTIONS

MIKE FRIEDRICH

ARMOR ©1982 Continuity Comics / WONDER MAN, SPIDER-MAN, CAPTAIN MARVEL ©1982 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc. / "The Swiss Family" art ©1982 Craig Russell / ARZACH ©1982 Stevenscher Bellpics /

there will be even more clients in the future."

fairest and far-seeing individuals I've ever had the pleasure to work with. He pays well, too!

The industry hasn't always been quick to adapt to Mike's progressive contributions — the wheels of progress grind exceedingly slow and all that, but that's never stopped him from tackling the Monster. The Monster, as I see it, is retrogressive tendencies, Stone Age leftovers from the days when publishers pulled the strings and creators danced.

*Mike's eternal message, as the comics agent, has been that that relationship serves neither party. Star*Reach is continually exploring new ways to point both creators and publishers toward more enlightened relationships, in big and little ways, personal and professional. The guiding principle is that if we all treat each other better, we can create a better product which will sell better and promote more human values.*

(The reason I cheated is that DAK always told me some of the best interviews were done by interviewers who weren't on intimate terms with the interviewee. So I placed myself in the Zen state of beginner's mind, and started at the beginning.)

Enjoy . . .

Pencils (detail) by Brian Apthorp — from Continuity Comics' ARMOR.

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Mike Friedrich
Born: 27 March 1949 — Oakland, CA
Residence: Berkeley, CA
Occupation: Agent and marketing consultant
Education: BA 1971 Santa Clara University
Credits: Writer, DC and Marvel, 1967-1975; Publisher 1974
Professional Influences: Neal Adams and Jim Steranko
Family: A loved one, two cats, two parents, five sisters, three brothers, thirteen nephews and nieces, lots of in-laws, too
Hobbies: Computer simulation games, software, poker

MARK BORAX: *How many clients are on your active list?*

MIKE FRIEDRICH: Well, it's been changing pretty dramatically. The last list put us over 50. We've been going through an *extremely* dramatic change lately, and probably have added at least 20 clients in the last three months, whereas for the last couple of years we had been discouraging new clients. With **Sharon Cho** coming on it's helped us to service more people. So Star*Reach is growing *rapidly* and we expect there will be even more clients in the near future.

MARK: *And who are your clients?*

MIKE: They are artists and writers who work in the comics industry. All of them are working professionals in one way or another. We, except in very *rare* cases, are not able to help people who are just starting out; they need to have had *some* professional experience, particularly on the writing side — on the art side we have been able to help *some* newcomers.

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"There tends to be a sense on the part of creators to

WONDER MAN (pencil) figure work by Darick Robertson — from the 1992 WONDER MAN ANNUAL.

MARK: *Would you drop some specific names of who your clients are?*

MIKE: It's always difficult to do that because we're always afraid of leaving somebody out. Probably the more well-known people are folks like **P. Craig Russell, Paul Chadwick, Roy Thomas, Howard Cruse, Eric Shanower, Tim Conrad, Steve Englehart, Mark Wheatley** . . . boy! *(Laughter.)*

With the development of Epic Comics at Marvel, Pacific Comics and Eclipse Comics really moving forward, and First Comics coming out in '82 to open up the whole independent area in a way that it hadn't been before, then with DC responding to that by expanding the deal that they had for new properties — I realized it was now a fairly *complex* world and that sooner or later agents would appear. I had no aspiration to fill that role, but toward the end of the summer of '82 I started to look more seriously at what I would like to do. The idea occurred to me that maybe I could be the one to be that agent, since it would combine a lot of my business skills on behalf of the creative people that I've always personally identified with. I had this idea on a Thursday and by that weekend I had two projects to represent, and to my great misfortune I sold them both. *(Laughter.)* And everything has flowed from there.

MARK: *Who were the creators?*

MIKE: The first person I turned to was **Mark Evanier,** who by coincidence had come up with a project called DNA-GENTS with an associate of his, **Will Meugniot,** and we were able to place that with Eclipse Publishing, which published it successfully for quite a number of years. The second person I went to was **Steve Gerber,** who had an idea called VOID INDIGO, and we hooked it up with **Val Mayerik.** Steve, who had just settled his lawsuit over HOWARD THE DUCK with Marvel, was totally astonished when I sold this project to Marvel, to Epic Comics. Unfortunately it turned into a major disaster, a great embar-

personalize the relationships they have with publishers."

rassment to all of us involved in it. But still, we were able to get it sold, and then contracted for, through some pretty intense negotiations, into print.

MARK: *Steve at that point had won a lawsuit with Marvel?*

MIKE: No, they *settled* the lawsuit.

MARK: *And he was astonished that you had placed his project with Marvel because he had just been in a conflict with them?*

MIKE: There tends to be a sense on the part of creators to *personalize* the relationships they have with publishers. For him it was very *personal* that he was in this conflict with Marvel. To Marvel it was all business — and once that business was taken care of, there was no obstacle to *more* business. I don't know the terms of the settlement, but I understand that it was a settlement that both parties felt comfortable with. In my mind, as a businessman, why not go forward and take the property to the best company that could do something with it, which at the time was Marvel Comics.

MARK: *So, as an agent you were able to represent a project to a company that the creator probably wouldn't have considered.*

MIKE: Right, exactly.

MARK: *So, this is an example of the value of an agent's objectivity acting between a publisher and a creator.*

MIKE: I don't know if I would *phrase* it that way, but we have a bit of a distance, compared to a creator's perspective. That enables us to look at the whole industry and place a particular project from a perspective that a creator might not be able to see from being so close to it. It may also be, conversely, that the best place for a creator to send a project is the people they're working with right now, which is also something they might not know. Or if they know it they might not be aware of *why* that is the best thing.

MARK: *Why is it that some of the best people a creator could work with are the people they are already working with?*

MIKE: Oh, because of the relationships that happen between creative people and their editors, and then onward to the company. At most publishing companies the big factor in whether a property is successful is how well it's marketed, and that to a *great* degree depends on an editorial enthusiasm to motivate marketing departments to get excited. In a small company the editors and marketing people are frequently the same people; in larger companies they're separate departments. But there needs to be an editorial connection *first* before there is a marketing connection.

MARK: *So, the value to a creator is if the creator has an already existing relationship with certain people at a publishing house, it's probably in their advantage to continue that?*

MIKE: Oh, yes, absolutely! I mean, I *never* counsel people to break off existing relationships for trivial purposes. It's a very traumatic event to shift publishers and you should have a damn good reason for wanting to do that. There's trade-offs no matter where you are. There's no such thing as a perfect publisher, and if you've got problems with one right now you may have *worse* problems with the next one.

So, what we try to do is help evaluate on a constant basis what the strengths and weaknesses for a particular person are with a particular publisher. All the major publishers in our field are good publishers. But there is a chemistry that works better with some creators and publishers and not with others, and between certain editors. In a larger company there might be one editor that would like a particular artist, and another editor at the same company just *wouldn't*. Well, we will tend to have a better sense of who the most likely compatible person is for a creator to

"Within Our Reach" cover by Norm Breyfogle — featuring everyone's favorite web-slinger.

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"I'll pound tables, but it's not the way I like to act."

talk with.

MARK: *What's your favorite part of being an agent?*

MIKE: Well, on a *personal* level I think what I enjoy the most is the actual contract negotiating process. The subtleties of rights and ownership and promotion and distribution to me are really fascinating. And keeping all of those different aspects in the air at one time and balancing them, trading them off with a publisher, is a lot of fun. Obviously, my job involves an awful lot *more* than what I've just described — I don't do an awful lot of negotiating on a daily basis, but when it does come around that's what I enjoy the most.

MARK: *What percentage of your job is contract negotiating?*

MIKE: Maybe 10%.

MARK: *And what does the other 90% consist of?*

MIKE: It's more the general discussions with clients and their editors as to what's going on in our clients' careers. On a weekly basis we're talking with just about everybody about what's going on with them and where they are going. We don't get involved in the day to day work with an editor, but we are involved behind the scenes in collecting checks and pushing the paperwork through the system.

MARK: *So, the picture that might be in the average person's mind who doesn't know about agents would be perhaps a Hollywood stereotype from the movies, such as the agent puts pressure on, twists arms, sells projects, and aggressively gets a lot of things out of the publisher that the creator can't get. Everything you're describing so far doesn't seem to fit into that stereotype.*

MIKE: No. That's a reflection of my personality; I'm not much of a table-pounder. I mean, I'll pound tables once in awhile, but it's not the way I like to act. I'm much more oriented towards building positive, cooperative relationships between creative people and their publishers so that we *all* benefit. We're hired by creators to advance their careers. It's our attitude that the best way for a creator to make money is if their publisher is making money, so we really work with *both* sides. We're not above kicking our creators' rear ends for missing their deadlines. We'll work with editors to make sure that creators understand the importance of their production schedules.

MARK: *Now, let's say I'm a comics creator who is already well established. Why should I hire you?*

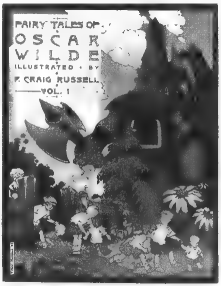
From STAR*REACH (The Comic) #1, what is most probably an unused page (or cover?) from Walt Simonson's contribution (along with writer Ed Hicks): "A Tale of Sword & Sorcery" — 1974.

FAIRY TALES OF OSCAR WILDE

ILLUSTRATED * BY

P. CRAIG RUSSELL

VOL. 1



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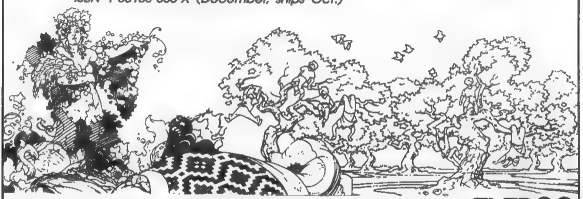

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REPRESENTATION: STAR*REACH PRODUCTIONS

"We sense the value of an individual creator."

MIKE: Well, again, the long view is important, I think. We've had an example of one client of ours who's been in the business for many many years whose *style* significantly changed in the last six months. The publisher that he had been most comfortable with for the last number of years had a hard time accepting the new style. It wasn't anything personal, it was just aesthetically they had a difference of opinion. We were in a position to very quickly realize that this was happening and to deal with it. We suggested new people that the creator could go to that would appreciate the style of the work. A relatively smooth transition has occurred in the creator's career to reflect the new interests that he's got.

There's also a tremendous number of creative people who don't really realize the true value of their work in the marketplace, what kind of position they *could* have if they wanted it, in the form of more interesting strips to work on, in the form of better people to work with, in the form of the kind of money they're getting. Since we are really in touch with the distribution side of the business as well as the creative side of the business, we really have a very strong sense of what the *value* of an individual creator is at a particular time. And a more established creator might not really know what that is. We can help them maximize the possibilities. Most people who are working steadily are making a good living. The questions are: Can you have more fun? Can you do better financially? And in most cases the answer is yes. Obviously, if somebody comes to us and we feel that what they're doing right now is the perfect thing they should be doing, there may not be a reason to hire us.

MARK: *Let's say I'm more an entry level creator who has just been published recently, but I'm used to making all my own career moves, calling the shots. Let's say I enjoy talking directly with the editors and making my own moves. How do I manage to keep control if I sign over with you and give you the power to speak for me?*

MIKE: Well, in the first place, the thing to recognize is you're *not* signing over control of your life to us. We don't stand in front of you, we stand behind you. You have a relationship with your publisher and we're your advisors. And we're your intermediaries if you choose to have us be so. If you want us to talk with your editors, fine, we'll do that. If you want to go out there and handle things on that level, that's fine with us, too. The question is going to be what's *best* for you — what are your goals, what do you want — and we'll suggest ways to achieve them. If you want to be the one to get out there and do the legwork, fine, that's okay.

MARK: *If I'm the one who ends up doing the legwork and talking to the editors, what reason is there to hire you?*

MIKE: Well, for the quality of the advice that we give you regarding who you're talking to and what to say to them. We have a couple of clients who really do not want to have initial contact done by us, but we will have good discussions with them as to the best way to approach a particular editor or a particular publisher, what kind of response they're likely to get to a particular idea — to better prepare our client for the meeting that they choose to have themselves. For some people that's not worth paying us for; for other people it is.

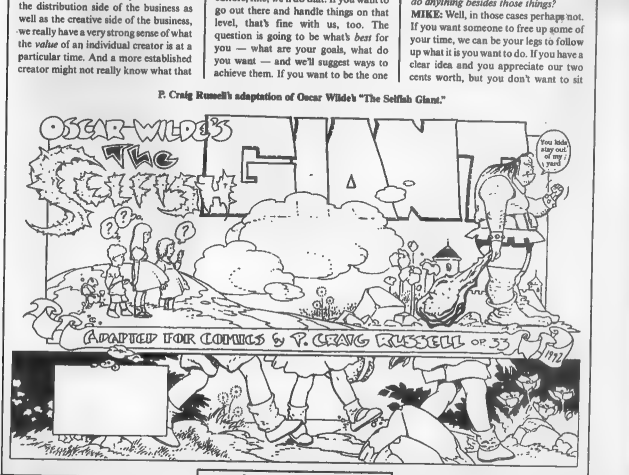
MARK: *I'm going to continue to make this question as hard as I can.*

MIKE: Sure.

MARK: *I'm a creator who likes to make first contact, talk with editors, and I'm also a creator who has a lot of friends in the business and I'm very well informed. Is there any reason to hire you? Do you do anything besides those things?*

MIKE: Well, in those cases perhaps not. If you want someone to free up some of your time, we can be your legs to follow up what it is you want to do. If you have a clear idea and you appreciate our two cents worth, but you don't want to sit

P. Craig Russell's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant."



"We have positive relations with the editors

Moebius' ARZACH character by Rafael Kayanan. Next page: "BILLI-99" by Tim Sale (scripter: Sarah Byam) — published by Dark Horse.

there and contact six editors, or be the one to sit down and actually go through the six months of back and forth it takes to negotiate a contract with the publisher that you've chosen, we do that work. If you want to be involved in all that stuff maybe you should ask us if you'd like a job *here! (Laughter.)* We could use more people who have that kind of creative background and enthusiasm and knowledge of business.

MARK: *You're looking for more agents.*

MIKE: Yes, absolutely. The demand is there from creators for agents. Our problem is being able to meet the demand.

MARK: *Apart from those representational services, does Star* Reach provide any other services for clients?*

MIKE: I'm not quite sure what you mean by that.

MARK: *What does the agency do for me as a client besides talking to editors and giving advice?*

MIKE: We're giving you a lot of information. We will provide you with sales figures for your books on a monthly basis. We will network you with other creators around the country who have similar interests to yours.

We have a broad enough range of contacts now that we can help set up working partnerships between writers and artists on new projects. Or if you're a writer and your artist has just quit on your strip, we can help connect you to an artist that would pick up the reins and work with you. Or if you're an inker and the book you're doing is about to be

because we've already taken away a lot of the crap."

cancelled, we can connect you to some pencillers who might be interested in working with you. That kind of stuff happens here all the time.

MARK: *Besides the sales figures, do you do any other record keeping? Let's say I don't like to deal with the clerical side of the business.*

MIKE: Well, we can refer you on to other professionals. We have four clients here in California for whom we've been able to find a tax advisor. We certainly can help give you some rudimentary tax advice if you don't know anything at all about it; we have general knowledge we can pass on. And if you need legal advice in a particular situation, we know a wide range of attorneys around the country, so we can generally find you someone relatively local.

MARK: *Now let's turn this question around and say that I'm a comics publisher with a long history of dealing directly with my writers and artists. Why should I have to bother going through Star*Reach to get to them?*

MIKE: To get to them to *hire* them?

MARK: *Why should I put a third party between me and the creators when I'm used to just dealing with them directly?*

MIKE: Well, you really have to ask the publishers this question, but the large publishers in the business have answered that affirmatively, particularly when we get into the area of contractual arrangements. There are an awful lot of details that need to be explained and as a publisher, why do it 100 times when an agency takes care of that for you? We actually have the major publishers now referring creators *to* us. I mean, not to go to Star*Reach, but Star*Reach will be on a list that they will give to people. We get calls that way for advice and counsel as to how to deal with situations, *particularly* in the area of new material.

As far as if you're Marvel or DC and you are working with people on their ongoing properties, what the editors have discovered is that we screen a lot of the writers and the artists before the editors see them. If you're an editor looking for new material, looking for new people, you can rely that we have already established that these people are professional, that they deliver their work on time; the only question will be if they are appropriate for what you're looking for. We have a very high amount of positive relations with the editors at the larger companies on that basis, because we've already taken away a lot of the crap —

MARK: *So, the 99% of the people whose submissions are not even in the ball park don't ever make it through Star* Reach.*

MIKE: Right, yeah.

MARK: *Some of your clients state that your main value to them is sticking your neck out to secure benefits so they won't have to stick their necks out and appear like the bad guy. How do you know how much pressure to apply?*

MIKE: Well, that's always the tricky question. It's really going to depend on the circumstances and the people involved; there's no general way to answer that question. We just have to make our best guess. I think *most* of the time we're right, but we've made mistakes there, too.

MARK: *What happens when you overstep the line?*

MIKE: Well, we know it pretty quickly. *(Laughter.)* We'll get a pretty strong reaction. Fortunately, given that we've had a long, respect-filled relationship with most of the people we deal with, if we cross a line at a particular point most people will just tell us right, "Hey, you've crossed the line." And we'll adjust.

MARK: *What percentage of clients' fees do you normally take?*

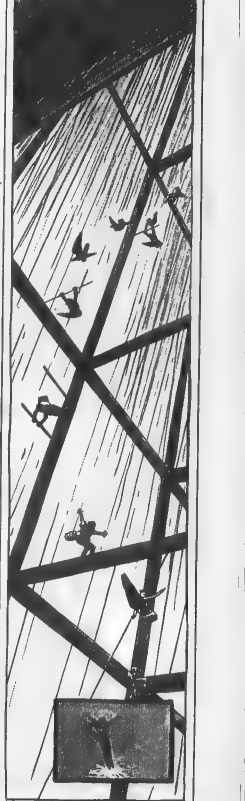
MIKE: It ranges between 10% and 15% depending on the person, the circumstances, and their position in the industry.

MARK: *How would you represent an original project that you personally have no enthusiasm for?*

MIKE: Hopefully with as much interest as I do the things I do have personal enthusiasm for, but obviously that's not possible. If something *totally* turns us off we won't represent it in the first place, let's start there. If we don't have *some* degree of interest and enthusiasm for a project, we're going to let our clients know that right away. But, what really counts is not so much *our* enthusiasm, but a *publisher's* potential enthusiasm. Our job is not jumping up and down ourselves; our job is knowing who out there in the publishing ranks is likely to jump up and down, and we go and target those folks.

MARK: *Has a successful creator ever approached you with a marketable, serious proposal that espoused values abhorrent to you?*

MIKE: *(Sigh.)* Oh, boy. Um . . . well, I can answer that in a roundabout way: What values do we have problems with? We certainly have problems with strips that demean people in extreme fashions, that have bigotry running through them, whether it's toward women or minority groups. We don't run into racism in



"We tend to be more enthusiastic about proposals

proposals sent us, but we will run into a lot of sexism. We have rejected new people who have approached us because their work showed these problems. I can't remember an existing client who has put us in the kind of position you asked about.

We tend to be more enthusiastic about proposals that are constructive in a general sense, having as an underlying theme positive, constructive, human values. We have a much harder time with more nihilistic, destructive concepts, of which there's quite a bit out there. Have we drawn the line against representing one of them? Not yet.

MARK: *Now, the comics product in general seems to largely consist of a bunch of people with big muscles bashing the crap out of each other, and the general universe that most comic-book stories take place in is far removed from the political and financial strata of real life —*

CAPTAIN MARVEL by Francheseo — pencils & inks.

MIKE: I disagree with that totally. I think comics, *because* they are in a fantasy environment, are more central to people's value systems than a lot of other things. When Spider-Man or the X-Men or Superman or Batman are beating up on a bad guy there is a real *deeply* felt sense of justice being espoused there; that there is good in the world and there is evil in the world, and that good *has* to win. That's what a large part of the comics that you've just described are all about. People can argue at great lengths, and I have a number of different positions depending on what time of day it is, on this topic, as to *how* those values are *expressed* in a particular context. But underlying all of this, I think, is a constructive trait about the desire for people to have justice in the world.

MARK: *But if the good guy is like some sort of millionaire playboy or right arm of the government/military/industrial complex representing order, strength, profit, American virtues, then if the bad guy is like a poor minority person who happens to break a law —*

MIKE: You don't see that in comics; you've just invented something that doesn't exist. I don't see those kinds of comics out there.

MARK: *So, the people that the good guys are beating up on are people who . . . what if they had a reason to turn to crime? What if they couldn't get by in the system as it now is?*

MIKE: Okay.

MARK: *What if they were stealing to feed their family?*

MIKE: A good story describing what you've just outlined will have as its theme the achievement of justice, and if the situation of the criminal is unjust the story is going to deal with that. It's not always the case in current comics that the protagonist is necessarily in the right all of the time, but the stories are about good and evil.

MARK: *What about the prevalence of violence as an answer?*

MIKE: Well, today I have a hard time understanding how violence helps solve anything. But if my clients find value in producing comics about people with big muscles, then I am perfectly happy to represent their interests. When I was a writer, I created guys who had big muscles, and I was perfectly comfortable then. I don't *currently* write stories about guys with big muscles, but that doesn't mean that I wrote invalid work when I was in my twenties, and it doesn't mean that the clients of ours that are producing it now are producing invalid work. I

that are constructive, having positive human val[illegible]s."

©1992 Tim Gula

support what they do.

MARK: *Do you ever worry that you're in a business that promotes values to kids growing up who may go out and beat people up because Superman did it?*

MIKE: Yes.

MARK: *How do you deal with that?*

MIKE: By, *particularly* with the writers who we represent, trying in personal discussions to make them aware that we recognize how important the values underlying their stories are, and for them to be conscious of what they're writing about.

MARK: *Artistic individuals aren't generally known for having the most well balanced personalities. How does the agency deal with ego problems?*

MIKE: With a great deal of difficulty. *(Laughter.)* If there's probably any *major* problem we have on a regular ongoing basis it's in that area. Naturally, you *have* to have a strong ego to be able to create work in the first place. If you don't have a strong ego you don't belong in comics. If you don't believe in what you're doing, why are you doing it? You *have* to believe in what you're doing. Naturally, when your beliefs run into conflict with other people's beliefs then there needs to be some accommodation reached. And when that conflict happens we sometimes get involved. But it's generally trying to help people who have a problem in a particular area to recognize their colleagues' positions. We'll tell a writer why an editor said something that they just said, we'll tell an artist why a writer said something that they just said, in order to try to put somebody in the other person's shoes. Usually it works out.

MARK: *Do you ever tell a client that they're being an egotistical jerk?*

MIKE: We have on occasion.

MARK: *Do they fire you?*

MIKE: We've been fired.

MARK: *Do people ever come back again?*

MIKE: We've had people come back.

MARK: *What do you do when a publisher keeps saying the check is in the mail?*

MIKE: We keep checking the mail and we keep calling to let them know about the results of our search. Every publisher is trying to pay the creators as best as they can. I don't think there's anybody, at least of the major publishers, that's really intentionally trying to screw people. But there are inefficiencies at all levels whether you are a small publisher or a big publisher, things fall between the cracks for various reasons, and regularly that's part of our job, is working through whatever problem has happened this week about somebody's check.

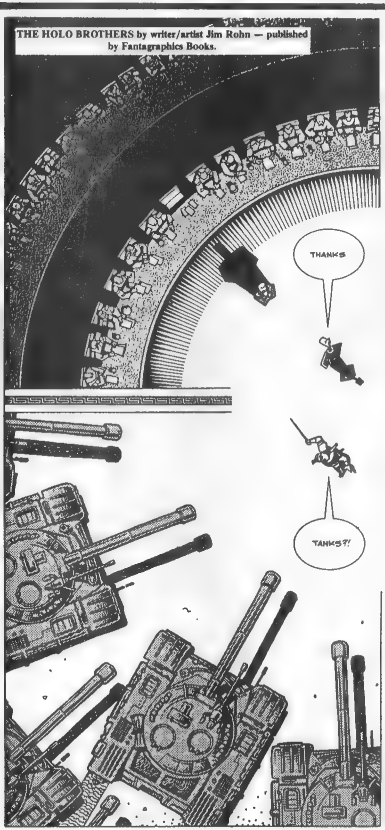
Illustration by Tim Gula.

MARK: *Comics creators as a whole have a lot less clout than, for instance, motion picture writers, who organized in order to gain a lot of clout. Do you ever see that happening in the comics industry?*

MIKE: No, not any time in the foreseeable future. I think the circumstances are somewhat different. In Hollywood you're dealing with hundreds of producers and every project is a business unto itself, where the comics business is a more ongoing operation. The relationships that a particular creator has with a publisher are not about this particular story and then they're out.

To some degree I disagree with your

"Marvel isn't a superhero company, but a *comics* company."



assumptions; I think comics creators have a *lot* of clout compared to Hollywood, particularly over the look of the final product. A writer and an artist have a lot more control over what their comic is going to look like than an actor or a screenwriter has in Hollywood.

MARK: *What do they have in Hollywood that comics creators don't have?*

MIKE: Well, since there's been a lot more money associated with motion pictures, creative people have been able to bring in a lot more expertise to help them get a fair share. The institutional knowledge that's available in Hollywood to creative people is a lot broader than exists in the comics industry.

MARK: *What can be done to save the industry from superhero tunnel vision?*

MIKE: I don't think it's my job to answer that question. I think that the industry goes its own way. The readers determine what the industry produces, I don't determine what the industry produces.

MARK: *But the argument that the readers determine what the industry produces . . . for instance, if Marvel Comics dominates the shelves everywhere with superheroes, how are readers going to ever even know how they would feel about some other kind of material?*

MIKE: Well, because they'll look at the other material that Marvel Comics is producing. Marvel is not a superhero company, Marvel is a *comics* company. Marvel produces, actually, a wide range of material, just as DC and Dark Horse and Eclipse and other publishers do. It's really more what the customers *buy* that determines what the publishers produce and the customers buy more superheroes from Marvel than other things.

Obviously, it's a chicken and egg situation, but I think that the real chicken is not the publishers, it's the readers. *They* determine what they want to read. If the readers change their minds tomorrow and they don't want to read superheroes anymore then the publishers will stop producing them. I think it's a senseless argument to constantly be ranting and raving about how superheroes are no good.

MARK: *Do you read superhero comics?*

MIKE: Personally, no.

MARK: *So, how can you represent things that you're not reading?*

MIKE: You asked me as a reader; as a professional in the business, yes, I read superhero comics. I have to, it's my job. I read them to find out what kind of ability and talent is happening out there, what the trends are, what the themes are, what kind of interaction between script and art

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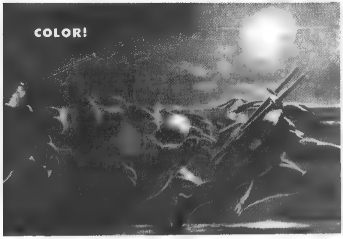

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BATMAN from DC Comics' STYLE GUIDE. This illustration is by writer/artist Dean Motter.

is the current fashion. That changes from year to year, so those are the things I'll read superhero comics for.

MARK: *It seems like you're implying that superhero comics are mostly a juvenile medium.*

MIKE: I think everyone recognizes that superheroes are responded to most by a teenage and young-adult audience.

MARK: *Do you see any development in producing a product that could be read by somebody like you?*

MIKE: Oh, yes! There are comics I read. I still like comics, like the form. I don't want to go into a whole list, but I think there are comics being produced for 40-year-old people, too. I *buy* them so that there'll be *more* of them.

MARK: *Why do so many top-flight creators end up soured on working for Marvel and DC?*

MIKE: Well, there's kind of a surface level and an underlying level. To some degree though . . . I generally attribute it as much to the creators' own personal growth as to anything else. When most come in and *start* working for Marvel and DC in the first place it's because what those companies produce *means* something to them. They *want* to do IRON MAN and THE FLASH, they really get into that. But for a number of people over some period of time that material can get repetitious, and if they then cannot go on and do other kinds of material, either within the superhero framework or outside of it, then they're going to be disillusioned. So I think to a great degree it's an *internal* change that occurs.

There is, of course, also the fact that the publishers — and I think that this is totally understandable — want to continue to produce comics that are successful for them. If they've got material that works for a 14- to 20-year-old readership, and you now want to start producing it for a 30-year-old readership, there's a real *risk* there.

Now, the smart publishers — and I would put DC and Marvel on that list — recognize that there is a 30-year-old reader and a 40-year-old reader out there also, and so they attempt to create avenues for creators to come up with *original* material that will go in those directions. Where some disillusionment comes in is that no one *hands* a creator a new property.

I would turn it around and say if you don't like the news go out and make some of your own — the opportunity is there at *all* of the publishers to create original material that interests you. So create it!

In Part II we discuss how tough it is to break into comics, Dark Horse's success in surviving the '80s explosion of alternative publishers, the Marvel/Kirby lawsuit, and the challenges of the upcoming rack wars.

LAST WORD

Comics Interview 234 Fifth Ave. Suite 301 New York, NY 10001

RIDICULOUS STRAW MAN: SHEER MINDLESSNESS

Dear Mr. Garret Michaels,

What an astonishing letter there was to be found from you in the pages of COMICS INTERVIEW #113. When I read it, I was troubled, and had to go back and check the interview **Lou Mougin** did with me that appeared in #112, because I certainly didn't remember making most of the statements, and I certainly don't hold any of the more bizarre opinions you attributed to me. It turns out I was right. Very little in your letter is even vaguely relevant to anything I said in that interview.

I have never suggested, in any context, that the comic-book industry is "wrong" for "not snatching up" our comics "in huge amounts." Not only do we not expect it, we would be extremely troubled by it should it ever happen. Indeed, as several of our distributors could tell you, on those occasions we've seen large increases in orders, we've gone out of our way to double-check and verify. Last month, for example, Capital City made a mistake in ordering. We could have filled that order, and held Capital to it; instead, we questioned it. And when Capital verified that it was a mistake, we willingly gave up several thousands of dollars in sales we could have had if we had been just a little bit less ethical in our business dealings. We emphatically do *not* want distributors and retailers to pursue the unethical marketing strategy of promoting as collectibles millions of copies of things that will never *be* collectible. What we *want* is for our forty thousand (or more) potential fans simply to be given the opportunity they deserve to buy their forty thousand (or more) copies of FLARE.

The ridiculous straw man you raise up with regard to our desire to see an increase in retailer orders for FLARE goes so far beyond our desires and expectations as to be laughable. We neither desire nor expect retailers to place larger unit orders for FLARE at $3.95 than they do for CAPTAIN AMERICA at $1.25. What we desire and expect is that they will not order CAPTAIN AMERICA to the *exclusion* of FLARE.

Didn't you realize, when you referred to a hypothetical retailer who sells 90 copies of CAPTAIN AMERICA and 29 copies of FLARE, that you were making our argument *for* us? It's actually more like a ratio of two to one, but let's use your numbers. If a retailer sells 90 copies of CAPTAIN AMERICA at $1.25, he brings in $112.50. But if he sells 29 copies of FLARE at $3.95, he brings in $114.55, which one is producing more revenue? I'll give you a hint. It's not CAPTAIN AMERICA.

And the difference in dollar volume is even more pronounced in real life. We do not and never have complained about actual sales of our various comic-book titles. Why should we have any cause for complaint when our Flare-related titles, in fair head-to-head competition, *invariably* produce more dollar revenue than 90% of what Marvel and DC produce? Why should we have any cause for complaint, when those few retailers who *understand* the truth somehow manage to sell 50 copies of the first issue of a $4.95 comic book like ICICLE, when at the same time they can sell only 90 of that $1.25 CAPTAIN AMERICA? Why should we have any cause for complaint when our comics are the ones that inspire new readers to start buying complete sets of back issues from our back-issue department? No, our complaint has to do with the hypothetical retailer who *could* be selling 29 (or more) copies of FLARE, but who only orders ten. Or none. And who thereby *prevents* our comics from reaching their proper audience.

We've *proven* that our comics sell. We've done it time and again. *Every* time a retailer who previously hadn't been paying attention to our product attempts

'TIL DEATH DO US PART!

any sort of focused promotion, he sees an immediate three-fold increase in sales. The result doesn't vary. On this afternoon of 19 August, the Westfield Company phoned us to place an order, expressing astonishment that they were able, with one focused promotion, to go from 70 copies of one of our titles in July to 190 copies in August. But to us, that increase was no surprise. We'd seen it happen too many times before.

It is sheer *mindlessness* that leads to the exclusion of good product that *will* sell, in favor of second-rate "Brand Name" product that ultimately *won't* sell. The fans, when given the opportunity, have supported us. But they can't do that when so many retailers aren't bringing our comics into their stores. Your suggestion that there's such a thing as overarching *fan* loyalty to brand name is unsupported by evidence. The only barrier between our comics and comic-book fans is the artificial barrier erected by the large number of retailers who choose to carry our product in minimal numbers.

Here's a case in point: Some months ago, **Duval Stowers,** the current artist for Lady Arcane, went over to Hi-De-Ho Comics in Santa Monica to get a copy of FLARE #6 the day it went on sale. Before he could get to it, the last copy was grabbed off the shelf by some kid. Duval went up to the counter to ask if there would be a reorder. He was told that it wasn't likely, because FLARE *didn't sell very well.* There was a moment's puzzlement. Didn't the clerk realize that he'd just sold out his last copy of FLARE within a few hours of putting it on the shelf? The response came back, with just a trace of annoyance: "Look. It's not a Marvel or a DC title. *It doesn't sell very well.*"

Mr. Michaels, *that's* what we're complaining about! How *dare* you suggest, as you do in your letter, that we should not complain in the face of such mindlessness? How else do you suggest that we, lacking the financial resources of a company like Valiant, get across the message that our comic books can and should sell for *all* retailers as well as they do for the few who already know the truth?

In the long run, if we can just hang in there, we have no doubt that we will eventually break through the bizarre retailer psychology that prevents us from achieving the total level of sales that we *should* be achieving. But in the short run, that stubborn mindlessness in the face of all evidence is murder. We were barely able to survive to reach the point that we're now actually turning a profit.

But we are now turning a profit.

And the message *is* slowly getting out, to fans and retailers alike, that something wonderful has been building over the course of the past few years. During that time, we've built our reputation for reliable quality. There *are* people out there in the comic-book industry who know that comics from Heroic Publishing are *always* good comics.

Right now, we're approaching critical mass. All it will take is one special spark. We don't know when or under what circumstance it will come, but it will come. And when it does, you're going to see something happen that hasn't happened in the comic-book industry in the past thirty years.

You're going to see a beautiful, wonderful explosion.

Dennis Mallonee
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INTERVIEW welcomes your thoughts and comments in the Last Word. Send your correspondence to: DAK COMICS INTERVIEW, 254 Fifth Ave., Suite 301, New York, NY 10001, or fax your letter to (404) 782-6625. Please include your name and address.

INTERVIEW reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity.

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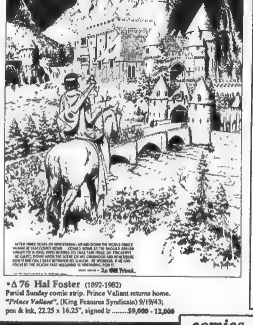
SATURDAY NOVEMBER 7, 1992



*A'76 Hal Foster (1892-1982)
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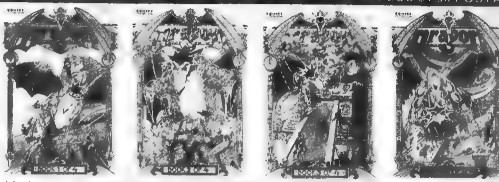

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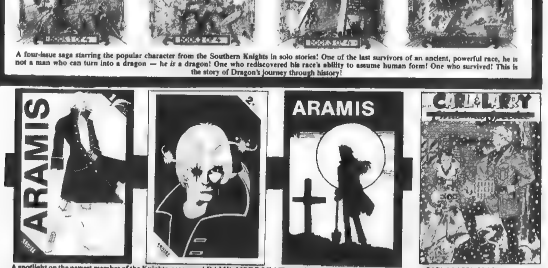

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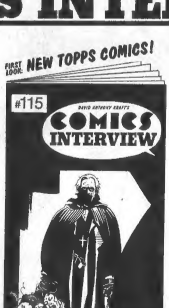

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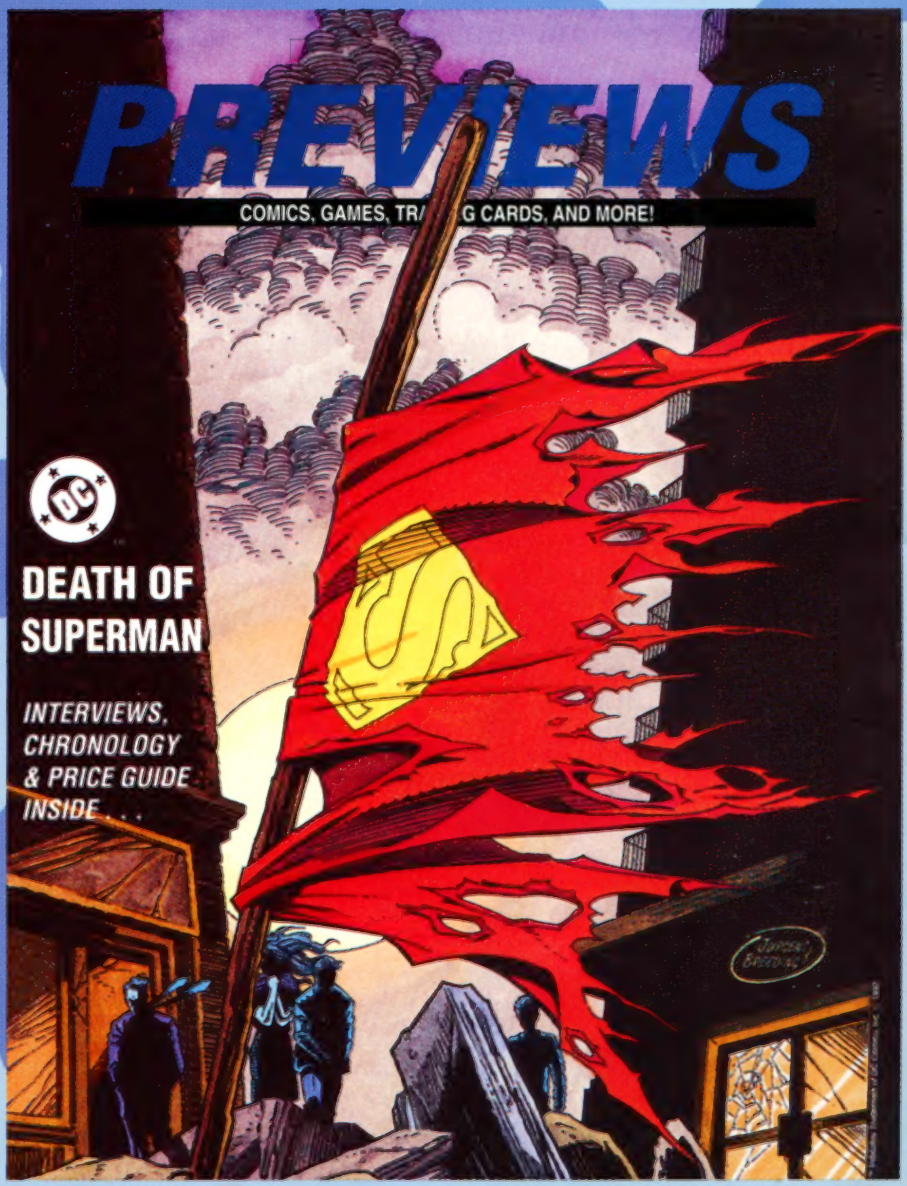

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